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ABSTRACT

Nairobi College, in East Palo Alto, California, is a school concerned with making education relevant to the ghetto community. The school, founded by students, is taught by community members and serves an area that is approximately 80 per cent black. In nine months Nairobi College has enrolled 120 students; 40 instructors offer 25 courses, which are of immediate relevance to the ghetto community and of traditional concern in education. Nairobi College has no central campus , and classes are taught in homes, churches, or other convenient community facilities. Beyond the normal class load, each student is assigned four hours of work in a community organization. The college faces the problems that all private colleges face, but even more so, since the school is located in a minority community. Local schools have, however, offered the use of their science laboratories; Stanford University has offered students library privileges; and Central Michigan University, Goddard, and Antioch have agreed to accept Nairobi transfer students. (RC)

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NAIROBI COLLEGE: EDUCATION FOR RELEVANCE
One Interpretation of the Community Service Function

UNIVERSITY OF CALIF.
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JUNIOR COLLEGE
INFORMATION

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Today the Nairobi College catalogue is a few xeroxed sheets stapled together. The college library exists only in terms of a book drive. The dining commons is a hamburger stand. The administration building is a dilapidated white shingle house, the trim just scratched with green paint. It stands not far off the road in the middle of a residential area. There isn't even a sign on the door. Nothing distinguishes the house from any other on the block, nothing but the daylong-nightlong stream of visitors. But "the people" know where Nairobi College is. They know what it is. And this, perhaps, is all that will matter.

Nairobi College is not in East Africa, but in East Palo Alto, California; it is a community-run college for "people of color." Since the school is new--1969--a lot of work is still being done. Nails are banged into walls; desks painted; screens must be installed. Students and teachers pitch in between classes. One visitor was surprised to see the college president, Bob Hoover, vacuuming a rug. Hoover also installs lavatories, hangs pictures. He joins the rest of his community--ministers, laborers, housewives--in building the physical as well as the academic foundations for the college.

Nairobi College is unique. It is unrivalled by anything even in the San Francisco Bay Area (U.C. Berkeley, Stanford, Mills, San Francisco State). Nairobi is unique because it is not a college community. It is a community

college. And it is a prototype for minority group education. As one pretty Mexican American girl declares, "Oh, yes, there should be Nairobis in New York, in Chicago, in Philadelphia. There should be schools like this centered right in every ghetto or barrio. That's where they can remain hip to the community."

THE COMMUNITY

The main goal of the school is to meet the needs of East Palo Alto and several similar neighboring areas. And the needs of such an area pose a formidable challenge. E.P.A. is an unusual ghetto--an area which has been raped by the too-rapid transition from rural to urban. In the past fifty years, it has changed from farmland to a cluster of chicken ranches to a low-income residential area. This unincorporated region has proved an embarrassing stepchild for the nation's second richest county. San Mateo County is essentially a bedroom community for commuters to San Francisco; but for the residents of East Palo Alto, the county living standards are no better than those of the inner city.

East of the Bayshore Freeway in E.P.A., eighty percent of the faces are Black. The unemployment rate is about twice the national average. The houses are substandard; fifty percent of the streets are ill paved and poorly lit. Transportation is a frustration of inadequacy. Sixty-three percent of the population is under twenty-five years of age. And of the adults, only half have had a high school education. East Palo Alto is an unlikely place for a college to start, exactly why it was started there.

President Hoover explains, "It's impossible to find a school really concerned with a ghetto community. There are many white schools for whites, but nothing is geared to the cultures of the Blacks and the Browns. And most of the schools are not financially or locally accessible to

these people."

But Clifford Erickson, Chancellor of the San Mateo Junior Colleges disagrees. He insists that the three schools in his district are making important strides in minority hiring and in ethnic curriculum. He describes Nairobi College as "a creative idea," but questions its value. He emphasizes the financial aid offered by county schools. However, over just such issues--alleged racial discrimination and unfulfilled financial commitments--the College of San Mateo (C.S.M.) last year exploded in fire-bombs and riot. Police were called in to quell the disorder; many minority students quit the school. It was from this core of protest that the idea for Nairobi was conceived.

Thus Nairobi College was founded by a group of students within the community. The classes are taught by people who live there. The board of trustees is composed equally of students, faculty and representatives of the community-at-large. "The college shows that rather than fight, we can create," observes James Branch, Black pastor of the First Baptist Church. "It shows that we can do things for ourselves and gives us a sense of group pride."

Hoover explains the long-range goals, "If we are going to meet the needs of people of color, we will have to educate leaders who want to work within the community--doctors, lawyers, engineers. We don't want all Stokely Carmichaels, but certainly we want some.

THE LEADERS

On the surface, Bob Hoover is not a likely candidate for a college president. The tall, handsome, very black, man looks younger than his thirty-seven years. Students call him Bob; he seems more buddy than

administrator. The faculty respect him fully. "He doesn't have a blacker-than-thou attitude," declared one instructor. Another claimed, "Bob Hoover is the most dynamic Black educator on the West Coast. He's a tremendous cat. As long as he sticks around, we'll be o.k." Hoover's charisma is of a subtle brand. His words are understated, but his affect is conspicuously potent. Under his leadership, Nairobi has "got itself together" in nine months--twenty-five courses, forty instructors, one-hundred-twenty students.

Hoover describes his involvement in minority education as "simply a process of evolution." He grew up poor and Negro in North Carolina. After four years in the military and four more at Penn State, he came out West to get graduate degrees at San Jose State and Stanford. Since then, he has been involved militantly in East Palo Alto Civil Rights. Hoover served as principal of a radical community high school and as minority student counselor at the College of San Mateo. His office at Nairobi is hung with pictures of Black Panthers and of his family. Indeed, 805 Runnymede is a second home to him. His wife Mary teachers English there. Their son Bobby is a little brother to most of the students. If Nairobi College is a prototype for minority education, certainly Bob Hoover is a model for minority educators.

Today his school is a two-year college; it will expand as needs arise and as finances allow. "Nairobi is an alternative to tearing down," Hoover concludes. "It is an alternative to an educational system which serves all people badly and people of color not at all."

"People of color"--nonwhite--besides Blacks, Hoover refers to Chicanos (Mexican Americans), Indians and Orientals. But Blacks and Chicanos comprise the majority of the minorities in the community. Aaron Manganiello, 28, is a Chicano and assistant director of the college.

A short, squat man with intense brown eyes and a quick manner, he seems more impatient than Hoover. Manganiello received his education "on the road." "I've been in the movement since I was eleven, since I heard W.E.B. Du Bois speak in Little Rock," he recalls proudly. "While I was studying at San Francisco State, I met John Handy and toured with him in his Freedom Band for C.O.R.E. Since then, I've worked with Ron Karanga, Bobby Seale (two prominent Black Panthers) and Bettina Apthecker (a new Left leader who became famous in Berkeley's Free Speech Movement)." Manganiello is often asked about his last name. My step-father is Italian," he answers. "For a while I was going to change it to Gerusa but I decided 'to hell with it;' I'll do my own thing and let people judge me on that."

Manganiello's "own thing" includes serving as Minister of Education for the Brown Berets, a Chicano group similar to the Black Panthers. Now he spends most of his time working in neighboring Redwood City where the majority of the poor are Mexican American and where he plans to open the doors of another community college. The school will be associated with, but autonomous of, Nairobi. It will be called "Venceremos" (we shall overcome).

The support for Nairobi College extends even into the neighboring White communities. "It makes sense for people of common characteristics, of common deprivations to band together," observes one man, "the end can be more power to the individual, more control over career choice, for instance." Actually, it seems no one is overly committed against the school. But as Gilberto Villareal, Chicano finance officer at CSM remarks, "Some of the people who say 'I hope they succeed,' really mean--"I hope they get off our backs."

THE CAMPUS

The Nairobi campus must be seen to understand the college. Take a drive with Sam White; he eagerly points to the close ties between school and community. White, a bearded, husky, Blackman, is a part-time student at Nairobi. At twenty-nine, he has a full-time job at a Philco plant nearby. He thought he was finished with his schooling long ago--but now he is proud of his participation in the college. "See, this is our campus," he says driving down wide, tree-lined Bay Street. "Yeh, this is our school church. . . our school variety store. . .our school liquor store. . .our school bar," he laughs.

White explains that there is no "physical plant," no isolated campus, no Ivory Tower, at Nairobi. The school grounds extend to the boundaries of East Palo Alto. Classes are held in churches, the teen center, instructors' homes, student's apartments. There will never be a separate campus for the college because the citizens believe the school must be located in the community if it is to be focused on their needs.

English, biology and psychology are taught at a worn, old shopping center recently renamed "Nairobi Village" and duly baptized with a plastic sign.

THE CURRICULUM

The curriculum is designed to meet the needs of the community on an immediate level--solving local problems--as well as on a long-range level--motivating study in the professions which will later serve to upgrade the area. Nairobi's classes, then, range from remedial work to university transfer courses.

Mary Hoover teaches an English course called "developmental skills." This means that every Tuesday and Thursday from 3-5 she drills her students out of the lingual rut ignored by inadequate teachers in ghetto high schools. Basic spelling, pronunciation and syntax are reviewed; the students repeat words after their teacher and take dictation. They are not embarrassed by the remedial nature of much of the subject; they are more concerned with learning it. One student, Naiomi Moss, explains, "The class is a real help. There's more detail and explanation here at Nairobi; the people just seem to care more than at other schools. They get down to the basic problems."

Manganiello's political education course is unorthodox in a different sense. The class meets two nights a week in Manganiello's living room. Students sit on couches, armchairs, the floor. Three classmembers wear brown berets lettered in gold with "La Causa." Indians are the first topic of discussion this one evening--the Indians who have reclaimed Alcatraz Island. "The school is doing all it can to help the cause," says Manganiello. "Some of us are taking food over this weekend." He compares the government's treatment of the Indians to the official disregard of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hildalgo. The treaty bears many unfulfilled promises, including the one that California remain a bilingual state.

Later the students discuss the rationale for the class itself. "This is 'political education,' not 'political science,'" they insist. "It's not an exercise in polemics," their teacher explains. "We relate politics to other things--education, economics. Sometimes we spend the whole class discussing a sociological issue."

The journalism class has home base in the office of a defunct underground newspaper. Surrounded by piles of old newsprint, by posters of Ho and of the Cleavers, students sit at tables typing their copy. Editorial

meetings are held in the front room, on a lumpy, home-made couch. This class, too, is trying to meet some of the immediate needs of East Palo Alto. They plan to publish a newspaper. "It's not a school paper, but a community paper," insists their White instructor, Marlene Charyn.

The newspaper will be called Umoja ("unity" in Swahili). Umoja's founders, Duane Jones and Sam White, are recruiting articles from all segments of the community. "Do your thing!" their pamphlet reads, "To fulfill the role of the people's voice, the participation of everybody is necessary--writing, art, photography, selling, rapping, shit work. Do your thing!"

More traditional college fare such as philosophy, electronic theory, economics, physics, anthropology, art, is also taught at Nairobi along with innovative offerings of black music, black legal problems and Swahili.

In addition to the normal load of classes, each Nairobi student will be assigned four hours of daily work in the community--in health centers, schools and welfare offices. "You learn about people by helping them" explains Hoover. "We want to put people in positions where they are forced to develop community responsibility. I think they'll learn that it's fun to help other people."

"The college is not an ethnic studies program," stresses Manganiello. "It is a school of Black studies or of Chicano studies only in the sense that most schools today are schools of White studies. Most of the people here had almost given up on the relevance of education. They thought that no one could understand them. You have to realize that it's not worthwhile for a minority student to go to college unless it offers a change from what he's had before."

THE STUDENTS

The students at Nairobi are a cross-section of the community--factory workers, day maids, housewives, as well as college age youths. Most of these people work during the day. That's why classes are held in the late afternoon and early evening. Hoover is especially pleased by the strong response from adults.

Aidamar Jones, 39, is one of the working mothers who attends classes. "I'm so proud to be part of the college," she declares in heavily-accented enthusiasm. "For twelve years now I have been in this country with no chance to go to school; I could not afford to go anywhere else." Mrs. Jones, a Black Brazilian, is enrolled in two English classes. "I used to be so terrified of writing, but the other day in class I wrote one page, then two pages, then three pages. Last night a friend told me my vocabulary is much better. I really feel like the college was designed for me."

As part of its central function to the community, Nairobi recruits many students who wouldn't normally be in college. "One eleven year old boy is enrolled," Hoover comments. "He has been having extreme difficulty learning to read in the elementary school. It was the feeling of his mother and of some friends in the neighborhood that his ego became involved in his reading. The students at school laughed at him. He became withdrawn; we thought that going to a college class would give his ego a boost. There is no question that we can teach this young man to read."

There are, of course, "regulation-type" students at Nairobi. "Regulation," that is, in age and ability only, for it was the regulation, the regimentation, the racism which drove these students to leave other colleges

for Nairobi.

"Why travel fifty miles a day somewhere that they don't want you in the first place?" demands Albert Nelson, a tall bespeckled sophomore. Nelson's skin tone is on the lighter side of the white-black scale, but his attitudes are fixed at the other end. Nelson bitterly recalls the tokenism of a minority program at CSM. "The problem with black studies programs in most schools," he declares," is that all the strings are held by White people. Nelson wants to become an architect and he knows that next year he will have to transfer to a four-year college. After his degree, though, he plans to return to his community and help develop Nairobi. "This school poses a threat to the system because it is a workable answer to minority education," he concludes. "Everyone here has a say-so in the college."

Audilita Morales and Rebecca Lopez have also attended other colleges; they joined some friends after class one evening to talk about Nairobi. "We learn things here you couldn't find in textbooks," declares Audilita. "These communities are rich in knowledge and culture--but they're not researched. You can't read about them in White libraries."

"Right," declares Rebecca. "I ran into this at Stanford. A lot of White kids are trying to comprehend; they're trying to get into the movements. But I can talk about things, like Black power, from the vanguard. What I know just isn't in their expensive books."

Rebecca, 20, is a serious girl; she sits ellusive, behind the ovals of rimless green sunglasses. She wants to be a lawyer--to meet the White community on its own terms. Audilita, 19, has a more "state college" air. Her long dark hair is curled; her clothes are stylish. She voices more ideals than bitterness and hopes to be a teacher in her community. But

both girls are alike in one respect--their belief in the need for the college.

"It's important to be with your own people," they agree. Audilita explains, "The psychology in white schools is based on things in the White community. When I was little the teacher would go around asking kids what they had for breakfast. 'Bacon and eggs' was o.k. for Johnny, but what was the little Chicano supposed to say? Man, you could always tell the poorest kid, because he'd report the biggest breakfast."

"There's a whole different attitude here," says Rebecca. "You used to go to classes because you had to; now you go because you want to.

Another student, Duane Jones, speaks of Nairobi in terms of "an easier transition to college." Jones, a shy, quiet Black graduated from high school in June and is more tempered in his outrage against the White establishment. When he does speak out, it is with complete enthusiasm for his experience at the school. "You don't have to worry about money here. There are no charges for books and tuition. And you always know someone will help you. The teachers make learning more personal."

THE TEACHERS

All the students agree with Duane on that point--the teachers care more. One reason for the special concern is that the students are their neighbors or friends or the children of friends. But the low teacher-student ratio, 1-3, helps a lot too. Students know their instructors on a first-name basis. When they're not painting desks or erecting walls together, they will often order hamburgers from a local drive-in and eat dinner in the president's office "rapping" about local politics or school problems.

Another reason for the friendliness between staff and students is that the faculty was chosen entirely by the students. Forty instructors were chosen from one-hundred applicants. "We didn't look for any particular background in choosing the teachers," comments one of the six students on the committee. "We just wanted to know what they had to offer--how they could help the students."

The staff at Nairobi includes Whites, Chicanos and Orientals as well as the majority of Blackmen. Most of the teachers work full-time elsewhere. Two instructors teach at Stanford; one at San Jose State College and most of the others at more local schools and colleges.

Faculty recruitment hasn't been hard because most teachers regard Nairobi a refreshing respite from the restrictions of their own institutions. Cecil Reeves, psychology instructor, declares, "This school is devoid of the intellectual aloofness," he finds at the University of Santa Clara where he is Assistant Dean of Students. "At Santa Clara, the mind is the most important thing; at Nairobi, we try to integrate the mind and the body; we try to apply what we've learned in class.

Reeve's class is a little more informal than most at the college. Dressed in levis and a pull-over sweater, one evening, he perches on the back of a chair and points to some phrases on the board. "I win-you loose;" "You win-I loose;" "I win-You win." The class discusses personal interaction for a while, but soon their attention focuses on more immediate problems. One of the girls in the group hasn't been responding to the class for several weeks. She first sits listlessly, half-hearing the conversation. Soon she opens up, through, and explains that she's high on pot--she 'can observe things better that way." The class draws their chairs into a semicircle and continue to discuss marijuana as well as the girl's various

hang-ups. Too soon it's 8 p.m. and another class has to use the room. Instead of going home, the group resumes the discussion in an office next door.

Reeve's believes that the freer atmosphere of the community college is the key to student motivation. "The input here, the interest in learning is so much greater." Reeves hopes to leave Santa Clara for a full-time teaching post at Nairobi next year.

Frank Satterwhite, an English instructor, also works as an assistant director for the Educational Testing Service (of College Board fame). In his travels, he takes every possible chance to talk to people about the college. "It's serving as an inspiration to Black folk across the country--they're encouraged that we've just gotten this far," he says. "We're in a ball game the traditional institutions don't want to play, but they can draw ideas from us and that's fine."

None of the faculty members are getting paid for their work this first year because of miniscule school funds. But according to Bob Hoover, "Their enthusiasm is overwhelming. Most of the instructors teach here because they see a need; many do it for their own enjoyment. And from the remarks of the students, I would say that we have some of the most exciting classes in the Bay Area."

IMPLICATIONS OF AUTONOMY

Teachers and students alike insist that Nairobi's motivating atmosphere depends on autonomy from the system. Only by remaining free of state control can the college remain relevant to the community. The problems of academic accreditation and of finances still end in question marks. Cooperation from "establishment" schools remains tenuous. But the

people insist on fighting the battles of a private college.

Manganiello has one interpretation, "In America, the educational system services the state and it is no longer beneficial to continue to reproduce the state. Isn't it ironic to say, 'We'll change the society by fighting the state-controlled institutions of education' when it is those very institutions which have manipulated and continue to manipulate our pattern of behavior? It's like a psychiatrist saying, "To cure this schzophrenic patient, I must first become a schizophrenic."

Local educators accept Nairobi's resolve for autonomy. Ray Baachetti at Stanford is especially enthusiastic. "Nairobi reaches the people that higher education today either misses or mis-educates. The main problem of colleges today is reaching out to people of different backgrounds. Agreed, there is no such thing as Black math or Black chemistry--but Nairobi functions to teach the Black student math. The end of the teacher is the same as in a primarily White school--the student has learned math.

"The school will succeed," Baachetti predicts, "as long as its basis remains education--providing alternatives for individual power. I hope its achievements are highly visible and broadly shared. There are many things being done here and in East Palo Alto generally, that ought to be done around the nation."

Three schools--Central Michigan University, Goddard and Antioch--have presently agreed to accept transfer students from Nairobi. The reactions of other colleges has been encouraging, but cautious. They're interested, but right now it's a "wait and see" attitude. Hoover is enrolled in U.C. Berkeley's Junior College Leadership Program and he hopes to recruit grad students from Cal's school of Social Welfare for field

work assignment at Nairobi. Various local schools have offered the use of laboratories for science classes. An extensive book drive for Nairobi's library is being held in many institutions. Meanwhile, Stanford two miles down University Avenue, has granted library privileges to the students. Hoover and his staff are not overanxious about accreditation. "We don't expect to be accepted right away; this is not what concerns us," Hoover says. "The accreditation board asks a lot of silly questions like 'How large is your football field?' So first we're more concerned with the relevance of the school to the community.

Financial problems for private schools are reknown. For a poor minority community school, they seem insurmountable. Small donations have been received from individuals and from foundations. The College is now applying for a grant from the Office of Educational Opportunity which would help them get established and allow four years for an alternate base of funding. "If we couldn't find our own sources of income, we wouldn't deserve any more help," Hoover proclaims. "I'm very confident we can establish ourselves by then." The goal of a five-hundred student college with a one-million dollar budget is set for 1975.

Nairobi's curriculum, campus, students, and faculty reflect the character of the community. But the focus of the college is still more kaliedescopic than telescopic; it's a big job to identify the needs of a group of people 18,000 strong. Hopefully Nairobi will develop as an integral part of community life--a political base for overdue reforms--a resource center for local problems--the alma mater of community leaders. Indeed, the ideals are left to be substantiated. But the school has already accomplished two essential steps. It has given a sense of community

to a shunted group of poor people. It has made "school" a relevant word to a number of ghetto kids who had "dropped out." These achievements, alone prove that Nairobi is far more than an experiment. In a time of vacuous protest--it is a determined answer. It is a model, a prototype. The people at Nairobi College show that the centrality of community interests is the formula for minority education.